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Sustainable careers: Lifecycle engagement in work[☆]

Karen L. Newman

Ron arrived for his last day of work as usual, before anyone else was in the office. He tried to ignore the knot in his stomach as he turned on his computer and prepared for his first conference call of the day. Ron had risen through the ranks of his international consumer products company, stayed current in his field, become a manager, and participated in many projects that had been very profitable for the company. It made Ron physically ill to think about this being his last day at work. True, he was past retirement age and was fully vested in his retirement program. True, he was no longer striving for promotions. Yet he still had plenty to offer. Unfortunately, the company didn't see it that way. Ron wanted to keep working, but dial back his hours. But the company's philosophy was "all or nothing" – you are either fully engaged or you are not employed here. The truth was, Ron was being pushed out and he didn't like it. "I'll show them," he thought to himself. "I'll take my knowhow and my business relationships with me tonight when I leave. To heck with them." Yet no matter how much indignation Ron tried to muster, he still had that knot in his stomach. He didn't want to leave.

We all know a "Ron". It is no secret that the U.S. population is aging, and therefore the workforce is aging. The 78 million Baby Boomers in the U.S. are currently between the ages of 46 and 65. In 2000, about 10 percent of the labor force was 55 or older. By 2015, 20 percent will be 55 or older. The Boomer generation dwarfs the ones before and after by a factor of about 1.8 to 1.0.

Baby Boomers have changed many things about life in the U.S. since their births, and they are not finished. Their large

numbers in the workforce present an opportunity to invent more sustainable, long term, fluid careers that engage people appropriately over the life span, well past the historic retirement age of 62.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND EMPLOYMENT

The Boomer generation is the healthiest in history, with life expectancies into their 80s. They are energetic and want to be engaged in work, family, and community in meaningful yet flexible ways.

YourEncore, founded in 2003, is a new, successful firm that has arisen to meet the needs for retired Boomers to stay engaged in leading companies such as Proctor & Gamble, Boeing, and General Mills on a flexible basis. With over 6000 of the best and brightest retired subject matter experts associated with the firm, YourEncore partners with client companies to provide top quality talent for projects and problem solving in a cost effective and satisfying way for both the client company and the expert.

At the same time, Boomers are not very good savers. About 80 percent of Boomers have not saved enough money to retire comfortably in their early 60s, and recent financial crises have only made things worse. As a result, Boomers intend to keep working well past the age of 65 in far greater numbers than previous generations. In 1982, about 20 percent of those in the 65–69 age range were in the labor force. By 2007, that number was 30 percent, and by 2015, more than half of all people 65–69 are expected to be in the labor force.

THE AGING ADVANTAGE

Contrary to common beliefs, older employees are not stubborn, rigid, low performing liabilities. Numerous researchers

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find older workers to be more engaged, more loyal, less likely to quit, less likely to be absent voluntarily, more willing to work hard, and just as adaptable *when given the opportunity*, compared with their younger colleagues. This is especially true for jobs in which the physical requirements of work are not a limiting factor.

Older employees are better qualified, more interested in accomplishment, more interested in doing meaningful work, more motivated by autonomy and flexibility and less interested in promotions than their younger coworkers. Older employees do not require vertical movement in their company, but they do hunger for an opportunity to make a difference, to bring their years of experience to bear and to help others. They want to make a contribution and be respected for their wisdom and expertise.

We have an aging workforce that is highly qualified and very motivated to engage in meaningful work. True, older employees are more costly, but in terms of value delivered, they are worth it. An oft-cited study by Towers Perrin concluded that the total cost of hiring and retaining older employees was no more than hiring and retaining younger employees when differences in knowledge, experience, and wisdom were taken into account.

Keeping a qualified workforce is important, particularly in knowledge-based firms. Many companies are concerned about the brain drain that will take place when their highly knowledgeable employees retire.

Encana is in the gas exploration and extraction business. As with other firms in its industry, Encana experienced a business decline in the mid-1980s. Technically trained employees with low seniority were laid off, and few new people were hired. Now, 15–20 years later, its employee population distribution looks like a saddle – many young and old employees and few in the middle. Forty percent of Encana’s employees are eligible to retire in the next five years. It faces three strategic talent management issues as a result: (1) how can it transfer knowledge to its small middle cohort and its rapidly growing younger cohort quickly, (2) how can it retain the right Boomers productively, given that its talent management systems are built on the assumption that people will retire at about the age of 60 and (3) how can it revise its talent management systems so that this problem does not occur in the future?

The dilemma faced by Encana is repeated throughout industry, on the one hand creating opportunities for the right Boomers to stay engaged and undertake focused knowledge transfer and relationship management activities, and on the other hand, changing talent management practices now so that all employees have the opportunity to stay engaged for as long as they are willing and able. The challenge is building sustainable talent management systems for the future that are renewable, adaptable, and productive for all concerned.

BOOMERS AND GEN Y

While sustainable careers will help employers address challenges of an aging labor force, they will also help employers create an attractive work environment for the youngest generation of employees. Gen Y employees, those born after

about 1980, seek meaning, growth, and balance in their work. They crave mentoring, coaching, and guidance. They are different from Boomers in their trust of authority – Boomers had a notorious distrust of authority in their youth (never trust anyone over 30), while Gen Y craves guidance from their elders. Both Boomers and Gen Y-ers are more socially conscious than the generations just before and just after them. While Boomers couldn’t wait to set out on their own and caused the *en loco parentis* policies at universities to disappear, they became doting parents and now relish their relationships with the Gen Y cohort.

The Gen Y cohort is unique, though, in many ways. They want and need connection to each other and to the older generation, particularly if those connections can convey security, knowledge, guidance, and support. They value life balance and personal growth. They are socially networked on Facebook and Twitter in ways that mystify some employers. Yet some employers, such as Time Warner, created programs in which young college graduates mentor senior executives on emerging digital issues and trends, giving young employees opportunities for meaning and growth while educating the Boomer generation about technology.

Employers with sustainable careers will meet the younger generation’s needs by providing meaningful, flexible and balanced work experiences along with healthy, growthful, guiding relationships with older employees. The needs of Boomers and Gen Y employees are similar and complementary. Sustainable career practices allow employers to satisfy both generations at once.

ADULT DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Careers are viewed in many ways – as a series of jobs, as a cumulative set of experiences, as vehicles for self-expression, and a process of adult development. In the 1960s and 1970s the last of these was popular. Matching organization-based career progress to adult development was in vogue. Books about career stages and mid-life crises were popular (e.g., *Passages* by Sheehy and *The Seasons of a Man’s Life* by Levinson and his colleagues). In addition, scholars developed their own ideas about career development (e.g., Hall’s book, *Careers in Organizations*). In one way or another, they all assumed that adults move through predictable stages as they age. At their core, the adult development ideas of Erik Erikson were reflected in these books (e.g., *Childhood and Society*).

Later, emphasis shifted to “boundary-less careers” and “protean careers,” as organizations broke unwritten rules about long-term employment and employees assumed more personal responsibility for their career success. Protean careers are adaptable, based on individual needs rather than organizational structures. Yet even in these newer renderings of careers, ideas about adult development stages persist. As we age, we change; different life issues gain importance, while others wane.

If we look a little more closely at the stages of adult development, we can develop a new, extended vision for career engagement throughout life. The young adult stage that Erikson called Intimacy and Involvement corresponds to what some have called the Establishment and Advancement

career stages — the years from about 25 to 45. Here individuals are concerned with gaining their first positions, fitting in, performing well, and gaining expertise. This is the stage in which we have historically laid the foundation for future career success.

Erikson's next stage, Generativity, is characterized by caring for others, helping the next generation, and working through others rather than working alone. In career development theory this stage is called Maintenance or Maturity, lasting until retirement at age 65. This adult development phase spawned the notion of mentoring. Older adults are motivated to share their knowledge and help the younger generation enter the adult world of work successfully. In traditional career models, this stage is the culmination of early career choices and successes.

This is where career development writers stopped because this is when people retired. Yet Erikson has another stage of adult development — Ego Integrity. In this stage, people are motivated to integrate and make sense of their entire lives, to pull together the threads of their lives, look at the big picture, integrate their experiences and seek meaning in life.

What is the career development parallel? There isn't one, yet. Because people were leaving the workplace in their early 60s, integration was presumed to take place outside work. Yet, we know this will not be true for the Boomer generation and probably subsequent generations. So the question is, how can we incorporate the idea of integration and ego integrity into our career development practices? Simultaneously, how can we build careers so that employees in their early 60s are not burned-out, used-up, and obsolete? How can we configure a world that happily extends work into old age?

I suggest a new model of sustainable careers. Sustainable careers incorporate three elements: the need for renewability that supports longer working lives and life balance; the need for flexibility and adaptability that create resiliency throughout the career; and the need for integration and ego integrity in later stages. These three features, taken together, will enable productive employment while providing more balance between work and non-work throughout life.

SUSTAINABLE CAREERS

It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.

— Charles Darwin

Sustainability implies preserving and enhancing human capital rather than depleting it. It implies restoring and maintaining balance. To be sustainable throughout life, careers must have three features. They must include *renewal* opportunities, times when employees pause briefly to reinvigorate themselves. They must be *flexible* and adaptable. Half of what we think we know now will be obsolete in a few years. Individuals and firms need to be continuous and flexible learners, ready to travel new roads as conditions dictate. Finally, sustainable careers must include opportunities for *integration* across life spheres and experiences that lead to wholeness, completeness, and meaning. Let's look at each of these three elements of sustainable careers in more depth.

Renewability

Renewability implies replenishment in a reasonable amount of time. It implies the ability to refresh, to extend, and to be available indefinitely. The renewability feature of careers prevents burnout, akin to allowing time for muscles to recover after a rigorous workout. Renewable career practices provide periods of time for consolidation, reflection, rethinking and retooling. The case of Nancy Tuor of CH2MHill is an example.

Nancy was the project executive for CH2MHill charged with cleaning up a highly complex hazardous waste site that was littered with radioactive waste. She and her team completed the estimated 60-year job in less than 7 years at a cost of 1/5th the original estimate. The project was a quintessential high visibly, high stakes, fast moving and extremely successful experience in her career.

After completing the project, her career trajectory took her to a less visible, less turbulent assignment in which she developed future revenue streams through project proposals. She was not stagnated or plateaued, as might happen in another firm. She was investing in the future. She is now the company's project manager for building a carbon neutral city in the Middle East.

Nancy's story is not unique in engineering firms, yet it is also not common. Too often we move ourselves (or our employees) rapidly from place to place, assignment to assignment. A lull in the action is an indication of a problem, not an opportunity. Not so at CH2MHill. While the firm certainly keeps its billable hours at a reasonable level (80 percent is the expectation), it also has a practice of asking people to contribute from time to time in a different, less turbulent, less visible role, as Nancy did. The company benefits, as do its employees.

Not all renewal opportunities have to be inside the company. Sometimes there are opportunities for mission-consistent renewal experiences outside the firm. Patagonia has had a program since 1993 that melds its mission with renewal opportunities for employees.

Patagonia's Employee Internship Program embodies its commitment to the environment and allows employees to pursue and re-energize their passion for the environment. Employees take a leave of absence for up to two months to work full-time for an environmental group of their choice. Patagonia continues to pay their salaries and benefits while they're gone, and environmental groups worldwide get them for free. To date, more than 750 employees have taken part in the program.

Other companies, such as Hallmark, offer periodic times away from work for creative staff to explore current trends. PriceWaterhouseCoopers offers an innovative leadership development program, Ulysses, in which relatively new partners spend eight weeks on a cross-functional, cross-cultural assignment in a developing nation to improve the lives of the people in the region. Projects use the knowledge and skills of the partners to help them discover non-traditional solutions to vexing social problems. The assumption is that these young partners will be better leaders in the future, having had the Ulysses experience.

Flexibility

Flexibility means easily shaped and reshaped, adaptable, agile and capable of change. Flexibility implies range of movement, elasticity, and the ability to bend without breaking. Flexibility produces resiliency and confidence, two key components of positive psychology. Careers of the future must be flexible and adaptable, characterized by continuous learning both in response to change and in anticipation of change. We know things will not be the same next year as they were last year, but we do not know how they will be different. At Intel and many other technology-based companies, the majority of profits in any one year are from products that did not exist two years previously. Continuous learning is akin to tennis players always keeping their feet moving. The best players may not know where the ball will be, but being in motion helps them get to the ball more quickly.

Daniel started his career in the financial services industry, working in operations – the backroom activities that keep the system working. It was not a job that led to trading or investment banking or wealth management, yet these were the types of jobs Daniel wanted. He continued his education, learned the fundamentals of investing, and achieved professional certifications necessary for advancement in investment analysis and wealth management. He made himself available for task forces and special projects that gave him visibility among investment professionals; he learned everything he could about the business on the job; and he found a mentor who straddled his world (operations) and the other functions in the firm to which Daniel aspired. After several years in operations, Daniel was asked to lead a project team that gave him great visibility among investment associates. When the project was completed he was asked to manage the new activity – located in the investment management part of the firm. He is now a managing director in a prestigious investment bank.

Daniel's case illustrates one person's tenacity and flexibility. Even better are examples of employers who have flexible, on-demand talent management strategies so that many "Daniels" can develop simultaneously. These firms are likely to be young and doing business in rapidly changing fields, firms such as Google, Zappos, and Apple. Their flexibility and adaptability are part of the reason for their success – being able to deploy the right talent at the right time on the right task. And these firms attract talent that is excited about flexibility and not worried about a lack of fixed career paths.

Flexibility and adaptability require continuous learning – feet always moving. This suggests that people need to be exposed to (and expose themselves to) a variety of people with a variety of skills in a variety of settings to keep their minds agile and developing. It implies career resiliency – the ability to look after our own future and not depend upon others to take care of us. It implies building a protean career, one that is driven by our own values and sources of satisfaction rather than by an organizational structure, one that is adaptable to changing circumstances. It implies careers that are strategically tentative, comprised of choices today that keep open as many future options as possible. It implies small career experiments, a propensity for risk-taking, and the resiliency to recover from failures. The most successful

companies today are flexible, as are their employees. The fact that Apple recently overtook Microsoft in market capitalization after being all but dead twenty years ago is testament to the strategic value of adaptability.

Integrity and Integration

Integrity and integration imply completeness, wholeness, consistency between values and actions, and connectedness. From integration and integrity comes meaning. Older adults seek meaning in their lives. They are asking the question, "Have I lived a meaningful life?" and "How can I make a positive difference in the time I have left?"

Older adults have perspective, see connections and draw conclusions from disparate bits of information more readily than younger adults. They see patterns and networks that others do not see. They can relate the past to the present and the future in ways that less experienced people cannot. Imagine engaging experienced employees as one company did.

Sam, a long time employee at a mid-sized international engineering firm, had become marginally productive and difficult to work with. He was isolated at work, both physically and interpersonally. At 65 years old, he was as sharp as ever mentally, showed no signs of wanting to retire, but had lost his ability and willingness to work effectively with others. As a result, he was given tasks that reinforced his isolation and that were not at the cutting edge of the business.

His new supervisor, Tony, realized that Sam's talents were wasted in his current job. Taking advantage of Sam's years of experience and solid customer relationships, Tony created a Customer Quality Assurance role for Sam, representing projects holistically to the customer rather than contributing as one of the project engineers. Because of his years of experience, Sam is able to evaluate project quality and integration as a whole and able to be the go-between with customers.

Tony also moved Sam to the front of the office area in a prominent and visible space. He paid attention to him. He honored Sam's experience. He supported Sam's job activities. Sam completely turned around his performance. Where previously Sam was a troubled, even dysfunctional employee, he is now highly valued and respected by his peers and contributing to his company's bottom line.

This is an example of adding integration opportunities to talent management practices. Not everyone can be a Sam, but how many Sams are pushed prematurely out the door with a gold watch, or relegated to trivial work at the margin of the company? Sustainable careers engage the Sams of the world in ways that are appropriate to their stage in life, building on and using their need for integration.

The needs of people at this age can be met and their wisdom channeled to meet organizational goals in other ways. Rather than integrating many threads of life and work, another strategy is to focus on a particular skill of older workers that meets their need to achieve a sense of meaning and purpose.

Chuck Williams, founder of Williams-Sonoma, has found a role in his firm that allows him to add value while doing only what he does best. Founded in 1956, Williams-Sonoma grew rapidly until the mid 1970s, when it nearly went bankrupt. It had grown too quickly and outrun its resources. When the firm was purchased by investors in the late 1970s, the investors did not fire Chuck (who was about 65 years old at the time). Instead, they allowed him to do what he did best – prepare catalogs, write cookbooks, and select merchandise. Today, at the age of 95, Chuck Williams comes to the office every day and serves as an ambassador to the world for Williams-Sonoma.

Sustainable careers are different from traditional careers (Fig. 1). They have planned periods of renewal, times to rest muscles, add new skills, and undertake important future-oriented tasks. Sustainable careers are flexible and adaptable, changing form and function as business and individual needs change.

Finally, sustainable careers incorporate all adult life stages, including integration and ego integrity, to meet the changing needs of adults. As with Sam and Chuck in the examples above, experienced employees sometimes have a perspective and a need to contribute in a way that is aligned with their experience and age, different from

younger employees. The need to do meaningful work, to integrate disparate information, and to be respected is strong later in life. Creating positions for people who are bringing their life experiences together is good for business and good for employees. These integrative positions are not for everyone, nor can they be justified in all organizations. However, retaining people with knowledge and wisdom in new roles, rather than pushing them out because they do not conveniently fit, will be a competitive advantage for firms as the workforce ages.

IMPLICATIONS

The aging Baby Boom generation and its large shadow, Gen Y, present an opportunity to reinvent our personal and organizational career strategies. For 40 years we have made incremental changes around the edges of traditional career practices in response to more women in the workplace, advances in information technology, and the rise of knowledge-based work. Our existing practices show it. We still have vestiges of old assumptions – employment policies that punish or prohibit flexible work; promotion patterns that punish child-bearing and child-rearing; job descriptions that require face-to-face work when not necessary; and retire-

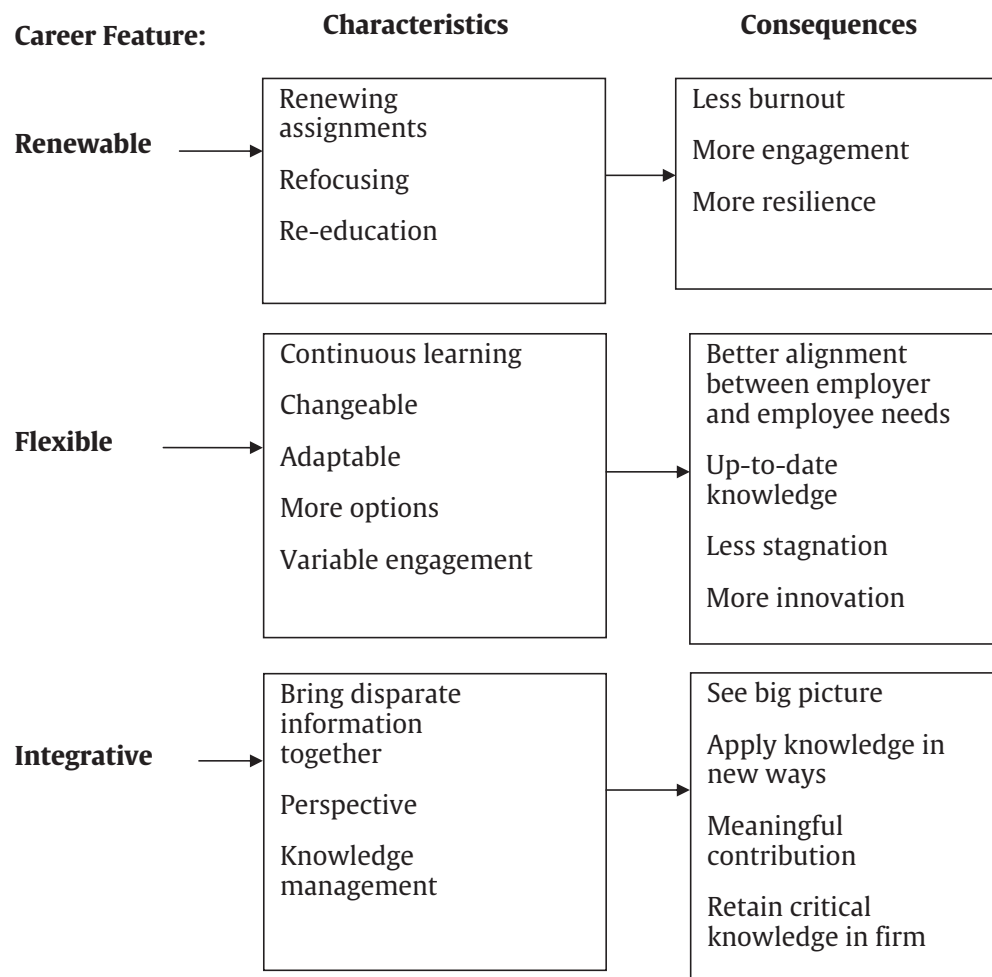


Figure 1 Sustainable careers

ment plans that push people out the door based on age rather than engagement and value.

The time for change is long overdue. As has happened so often in the last 40 years, it may be the large Baby Boom generation that triggers significant and lasting change in the way we engage people in work throughout life. Sustainable careers, embodying renewability for longevity, flexibility for resilience, and integration for unique sources of value address the changes in the workplace that have made our old ideas about careers obsolete. Let's look at a few concrete examples of how sustainable careers can help companies (Fig. 2).

Knowledge Management

Knowledge retention and knowledge transfer, huge issues now for companies, can be enhanced with continued engagement of more experienced people who have stayed current, who have not burned out, and who possess unique knowledge. As work in the U.S. becomes more knowledge-based, the need to manage knowledge will increase.

Employees who have experienced periods of renewal in their careers are less likely to feel burned out, more likely to be current, and more able and willing to stay engaged productively. It is probably tacit, implied, undocumented knowledge that is most importantly transferred by these people. Technical, documented knowledge can be kept in a database. But stories about false starts, failures, successes,

and luck are not easily stored in databases and more appropriately transmitted through face-to-face mentoring or coaching.

Employees in firms that have flexible, adaptable talent management practices are more likely to stay engaged in their work, particularly if they can go to more flexible work schedules. Chuck's story is a good example. He went from founder to near failure, to focused engagement during his working life. The owners of Williams-Sonoma knew how to value and use his wisdom, and continue to do so. Chuck's involvement has suited all concerned very well.

Finally, employers that incorporate the integration phase of adult development into their talent management practices will define new roles for their elders that facilitate knowledge transfer. Older employees can understand the interaction of disparate bits of information because of their experience. They can find meaning out of muddle that less experienced employees cannot.

Integration

Integration across functions, activities, products, and time is facilitated with older employees who have the perspective to see how the pieces and parts fit together. As the pace of change increases, organizations must become more agile and adaptive. To do this, they must decentralize and delegate so that individuals on the front line are empowered to solve problems and take action. But who will bring the decentralized

| Management Issue | How Sustainable Careers Contribute to a Solution |
|--|--|
| Knowledge Management | Retain older employees in fully engaged, flexible capacity to impart knowledge. Use specialized knowledge of older employees in new ways. |
| Integration across Units and Functions | Older employees with perspective see connections. Older employees are more likely to see the big picture. Increasing pace of decentralization increases the need for integration – a need that can be met by older employees. |
| Coaching and Mentoring | Employees with current knowledge who are engaged and not burned out are more likely to be effective mentors and coaches. Employees with varied experiences are more likely to be better mentors. |
| Intergenerational Management | Support careers for Gen Y that are balanced, growthful, and meaningful which enhances hiring and retention. Provide mentoring, coaching, and guidance to Gen Y. Improve inter-generational relationships and facilitates development of Gen Y. |
| Employment Costs | With lower turnover and knowledge retention, need to hire and train is lower. With up-to-date employees who are flexible, need for retirement incentives is less. |

Figure 2 Benefits of sustainable careers

bits and pieces back together? Who will look across functions and businesses to find synergies and opportunities for coordination and integration? Who can put this complexity into perspective?

Older employees can, particularly if they have had flexible careers and experienced continuous learning. The tension between delegation and integration is as old as organizations themselves. As work becomes more complex and change more rapid, the pressure to delegate and decentralize is stronger, creating a counterbalancing need for integrators and sense makers – roles well-suited to the wisdom held by older employees.

Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching younger employees is more possible with seasoned veterans on board who are still fully engaged. Coaching and mentoring are facilitated by sustainable careers that keep older employees energized and up-to-date. As with knowledge management, older employees can show younger employees the ropes, give them advice about work relationships and career strategies, and support them as they meet their needs for fitting in and getting ahead.

Modern mentoring relationships are really co-learning, as young people bring technical knowledge to the workplace that can be valuable to older employees. Mentoring relationships represent continuous learning opportunities for both parties and may represent renewal or integration or both for older employees.

Employing Gen Y

Though the Baby Boom generation is large and influential, Gen Y is just as large and likely to be just as influential. People in the Gen Y cohort, though different from others in fundamental ways, are also similar to and compatible with Boomers. Among their similarities are desires for meaningful work, personal growth, flexibility, and balance between work and non-work arenas. The Gen Y cohort craves mentoring, a role that can be filled by Boomers. Those in Gen Y are completely comfortable with using technology at work to facilitate meetings, maintain relationships, and support an anytime, anywhere approach to job performance. They place a strong emphasis on personal growth, which is enabled by the renewability feature of sustainable careers. They value life balance, a likely outcome of career flexibility. The opportunity to embrace the demographic facts of life by

re-inventing work and careers will be a competitive advantage in hiring and retaining the Gen Y cohort in the years ahead.

Employment Costs

Finally, sustainable careers lower employment costs by reducing turnover. Sustainable careers allow for ebbs and flows; they are designed to renew energy while providing challenging assignments; they are adaptable, flexible and changeable, which reduces the risk of obsolescence and stagnation. And they include positions that use the unique talents of more senior employees. While older employees typically cost more on an hourly basis, the value that they bring and the lower hiring and training costs incurred when they stay engaged make them cost-effective. Finally, flexible work in later life – less than full time – can be very cost effective for employers and very satisfying for employees.

CONCLUSIONS

The sheer size of the Baby Boom and Gen Y cohorts will force changes in talent management practices. Sustainable careers represent a viable, attractive future that will benefit employers and employees alike. The desire for flexibility dovetails nicely with the changing needs of employers for talent over time. Boomers do not want promotions when they age, but they do want meaning in their work. They may not need big salaries and significant responsibilities in their later years, but they appreciate engagement, usefulness, and respect.

Sustainable careers can help subsequent generations enact careers that sustain and nurture, that change and adapt, and that integrate and complete. The Boomer and Gen Y cohorts represent an opportunity to rethink how we develop and deploy human capital over time and over employment opportunities.

Sustainable careers are trailblazing. They will benefit younger generations as we live longer and healthier lives and stay engaged in work far longer and far more flexibly than in the past. The time has come to rethink our old talent management practices and implement sustainable practices that will serve us well in the years ahead.



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